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"Contagious Ectasy": May Sinclair's War Journals

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Women's Fiction and the Great War

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Introduction

TRUDI TATE AND SUZANNE RAITT

Why Women?

In a curious poem published in 1917, Violet Hunt describes a kind of darkness which has descended during the Great War:

> It is all shiny and black, like bombazine or taffeta,
> Or the satin of my grandmother's gown, that stood alone
> It was so thick;
> A screen between us and knowledge,
> That sometimes, when we are very good, gets on to the placards.[1]

Something stands between civilians and knowledge; a screen which Hunt likens to the surfaces of femininity: shiny cloth; a Victorian gown. The gown conceals forbidden knowledge from the viewer; and knowledge itself is figured as a female body, hidden and impenetrable. Yet the metaphor is even more complex, for the gown is remembered as empty, standing alone, supported by the weight of its fabric. Knowledge is figured as an absent female body; an empty space inside a woman's gown. 'Woman' simultaneously represents an invisible body of knowledge, and the subject (the speaker of Hunt's poem) prevented from knowing.

No one knew what was going on throughout the Great War.[2] Censorship, propaganda, and the sheer scale and complexity of the event made it impossible to grasp what was happening at any particular moment. Even combatants were often unsure whether they were winning or losing a particular engagement, and had no knowledge of the progress of the war overall, apart from what they read in the papers. Lack of knowledge was not gender-specific, nor even specific to civilians. But ignorance was often figured as feminine: a woman indifferently beautifying herself while soldiers die 'To save her light blue eyes from dreadful scenes', as May O'Rourke puts it.[3] As Nosheen Khan

20. Ibid. 436.
21. Ibid. 351.
22. Percy Lubbock, *Portrait of Edith Wharton* (London, 1947), 122.
23. Only Brant, not Campton, is compared with 'a civilian under fire' (214).
24. Millicent Bell, *Edith Wharton and Henry James: The Story of their Friendship* (New York, 1965), 339.
25. Elizabeth Ammons, *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (Athens, GA, 1980), 129.
26. Lev Raphael, *Edith Wharton's Prisoners of Shame: A New Perspective on her Neglected Fiction*, intro. Cynthia Griffin Wolff (London, 1991), 188.
27. The word 'faces' is used obsessively throughout the novel.

3

'Contagious ecstasy': May Sinclair's War Journals

SUZANNE RAITT

IN Richard Aldington's 1929 *Death of a Hero*, George Winterbourne sees troops returning from leave and muses: 'These men were men . . . They had been where no woman and no half-man had ever been, could endure to be.'[1] This notion that the front, where the 'real' business of war was carried out, was no place for a woman left many women feeling that they had no place in the war. Sandra Gilbert has suggested that women were liberated by the widespread absence of men from their domestic and working lives, although he does point out that as well as their 'sexual glee' women felt intense anxiety and guilt at having got what they wanted at woman men's expense.[2] But despite the government's efforts to recast the roles of mother, wife, and indeed of 'woman' in the mould of war,[3] women seem to have remained confused and uneasy, afraid of doing things wrong, but unsure how to do things right. For many women, especially older women who had no children to look after, and were beyond the age where they could be recruited for war service, the war heightened their feelings of useless ness. As Gilbert and Gubar see it, women felt curiously free, and so curiously unnecessary. Women like May Sinclair, already 51 when the war broke out, struggled to make a place for themselves in a world that was preoccupied with the vulnerability of young men, rather than of older women. Her war journals reveal in painful and awkward detail the shame of a middle-aged woman who sees in middle age her last chance at life. What kind of action could Sinclair undertake that would express and satisfy both her own greedy sense of herself as a woman, and the needs of a Europe at war? The war journals offer a unique opportunity

to explore the perversity of her position, her refusal of political engagement in favour of an awkward and excessive immersion in what she saw as 'real life'. This chapter will suggest that femininity is repeatedly experienced and represented as shame at times of social and cultural crisis. For May Sinclair was over and over again ashamed of being herself, and we should value the war journals not only for what they can tell us about women's humiliation, but also for their images of women's resistance, their ungainly refusal to be made to feel stupid or unnecessary. All patriarchies do this, but patriarchies at war do it most of all, pouring financial, emotional, and cultural resources into the maintenance of military masculinity.

It was into a war-world of sexual confusion and anxiety, as well as of enormous violence and suffering, that May Sinclair ventured in September 1914, as a member of the Munro Ambulance Corps, which went out to the front under the sponsorship of the Belgian Red Cross. She stayed about two and a half weeks. While she was there, she kept daily notes in a 'Day Book', and after her return, wrote them up as a journal. Three fairly lengthy extracts from the journal were published in the *English Review* in 1915, and a full version appeared as *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* later in the same year.[4]

As the war developed, Sinclair was to experience at first hand the trauma of bereavement: three of her nephews were mobilized. Two died in 1915 aged respectively 34 and 25 (William, son of her eldest brother William who lived in Hull, and Harold, son of her brother Joseph, who had emigrated to Canada). The third, Harold Lumley, also one of William's children, in a POW camp during the war, was invalided out in 1918 at the age of 30, and collapsed with pneumonia, arriving at Sinclair's house in London and requiring devoted nursing for several months. These traumas do not seem to have lessened Sinclair's support for the war. Until the end of her writing career in the late 1920s, she continued to produce novels which explore its attractions: *Tasker Jevons* (1916), *The Tree of Heaven* (1917), *The Romantic* (1920), *Mr Waddington of Wyck* (1921), *Anne Severn and the Fieldings* (1922), *The Rector of Wyck* (1925), and *Far End* (1926). As this list indicates, May Sinclair was a prolific writer and by the beginning of the war a very well-known and wealthy novelist. Relatively little has been written about her, but her war writing is a crucial and idiosyncratic contribution to women's

literature of war. As Laura Stempel Mumford points out, the absence of all political comment from any of Sinclair's war texts means that they can be read as justifications simply of the activity of war, and Rebecca West, in a contemporary review of the *Journal*, comments that 'one cannot imagine Miss Sinclair presuming to express an opinion upon international affairs. Yet by her mysterious subterranean methods she makes one ache for Belgium.'[5] It was the ache of war in which Sinclair was interested. She seems to have had remarkably little interest in the causes and the political justifications of Britain's entry into the First World War. What she cared about was war's psychology: the lure of danger, the revulsions of cowardice, the desire for power. Her support for the war seems to come not from her political awareness, but from her attraction to war's perversity. That attraction was a peculiarly feminine one, since she explored the psychology of those who were in some way excluded by the war (the pacifist in *The Tree of Heaven*, the pathological coward in *The Romantic*, women in all the war novels) from the point of view of one who was acutely conscious of her own exclusion as a highly-strung middle-aged woman. Yet she does not simply reiterate the complaint of countless women like Alix in Rose Macaulay's *Non-combatants and Others* (1916): 'it's jealousy that's demoralising me most. Jealousy of the people who can be *in* the beastly thing.'[6] Sinclair dwells on the ecstasy of war, on the pleasures fantasies of war can bring, on the contentment of the fighter. In Sinclair's novels there is no pain, no wounds, little disgust. The war in Sinclair's fiction is a perversely bodiless affair, as though Sinclair denied herself, or was denied, access to those male bodies which the war destroyed. It is the dynamics of this perversity that I shall explore in this chapter, and I shall be suggesting that Sinclair uncomfortably touched on one of the most awkward aspects of feminine consciousness: the association of humiliation with megalomania, and the vicarious sexualized enjoyment of masculine aggression. As Samuel Hynes says of the *Journal*, Sinclair was one of only a few women to convincingly represent the unpalatable 'reality of a woman's war'.[7]

From the first day Sinclair was outspoken in her support of the Great War. On 18 September 1914 twenty-five writers signed an 'Authors' Declaration' in *The Times*, stating that 'Great Britain could not without dishonour have refused to take part in the present war.'[8] Among the twenty-five were four women,

May Sinclair, Jane Ellen Harrison, Flora Annie Steel, and Mrs Humphry Ward. In an apparently unpublished paper, written during the war and called 'Influence of the War on "Life and Literature"', Sinclair, echoing Edmund Gosse's comment that the war would cleanse modern art of its decadent and degenerate tendencies,[9] wrote:

> I do not think we are going to be interested any more in their erotics, or their sex-problems, or, primarily, in sex at all; because of the enormous widening of our range of motives and instincts and emotions. Some of these—the will to fight, the violent courage and violent honour of War, and the greatest of them all, Religion, are primitive instincts if you like; and all the primitive instincts hang together. We shall no longer be able to regard Love, for instance, as an isolated phenomenon, but we shall see it as it is, rooted and platted in with the rest, having no more colour or importance than it gains by the general heightening of emotional values all round.
>
> For there is no doubt that these values were precisely what we were beginning to lose in 'life and literature', along with Religion, that is to say with our hold on Reality, before the War. Most of us—with the exception of one or two poets—were ceasing to live with any intensity, to believe with any conviction compatible with comfort, and to feel with any strength and sincerity. Yet we were all quite sincerely 'out for' reality without recognising it when we saw it and without any suspicion of its spiritual nature.
>
> And Reality—naked, shining, intense Reality—more and not less of it, is, I believe, what we are going to get after the War.[10]

For Sinclair the war represented emotional stimulation and release. It demonstrated the closeness of sex, violence, and mysticism. Moreover, it proved that love did not simply watch the fighting, but was part of the fighting itself. Sex and the erotic were no longer recognizable as distinct in themselves, but were seen to be inseparable from aggression and a number of other primal drives. To fight was to love; to love was to fight. As we shall see, other works by Sinclair, particularly the *Journal*, suggest that she did indeed see the battlefield as an opportunity to acquire sexual knowledge. In the piece quoted above, however, she quickly veers away from such an image to concentrate on the received image of pre-war Britain as an apathetic and dissociated society. She falls back on the vagueness of abstraction, 'Reality', to describe her sense of the war's consequences. In spite of its imprecision, such a phrasing emphasizes the sense

that she—and perhaps more than she—had before the war that they were not really living, that this was not life. As she wrote to St John Adcock, in a letter of 28 February 1915 that was probably intended as a covering note for her unpublished piece: 'personally, I feel as if I had never lived, with any intensity, before I went out to [the war] in the autumn'. The limits of her vision are indicated, though, by the preceding sentence of the letter: 'most of these things, at this stage, resolve themselves into what we feel personally about the War'. Much of the time she seems to have been unable to see beyond her own personal experience. The war was her romance: it gave her access, for the first time in her life, to a world of violence in which men and women mingled freely in an atmosphere of heightened awareness. The war becomes her answer to those wider questions which she so rarely asks. As she says in an article for the magazine *Woman at Home*, '[the war] came to us when we needed it most, as an opportune postponement if not the end of our internal dissensions—the struggle between Unionists and Nationalists, between Capital and Labour, between the Suffragettes and the Government, between Man and Woman'.[11] For Sinclair the final pair seems to have been the most important.

As an untrained woman, May Sinclair was an unlikely person to find herself on the battlefield so soon after the outbreak of war. Her sense of war as a marginalizing force emerges strongly from the repeated portrayals, in her fiction, of people who for reasons of age and health are unable to enlist. 'Red Tape', for example, which appeared in the women's newspaper *Queen* in November 1914, describes a middle-aged pair, male employer and female secretary, who race one another to get out to the war first. They are 'sleepless with ecstasy' at the thought of being near the fighting, and as Starkey, the employer, trains at a base camp, Miss Delacheroy becomes increasingly frustrated at her repeated failures of her Red Cross nursing exams.[12] Her (undeclared) fixation on Starkey is indistinguishable from her impatience to be in the thick of military activities: 'she saw [the war] as one immense, encompassing sheet of shells and bullets that converged on Mr Starkey in the middle of it. It was there, in the middle of it, that she desired to be.'[13] Miss Delacheroy is excited by the idea of danger: it provokes and fulfils desire. This is true also of the character Khaki, in the story of that name, first published in the *English Review* in September 1913,

and describing Khaki's unexpected enlistment in the Boer War: '"He was in love, *all the time*," she said. "He was in love with honour. He was in love with danger." '[14] Khaki's death redeems his ridiculous life and indicates that he had passions of which none of his friends had been aware. The war *expresses* him as no other love would have done, and for Miss Delacheroy too, the war is the man she loves. It offers her intimacy with him, a shared passion, a mutual intoxication. It is significant that 'Khaki' was written some time before the outbreak of the First World War. The war must indeed have come as the grotesque answer to May Sinclair's dreams, and her psychical investment in the idea of war meant that when it came, she welcomed it and longed to experience it.

But 'Red Tape' does not end happily. Fired with excitement because she has finally passed her exams, Miss Delacheroy runs down the stairs in the Red Cross building, trips and sprains her ankle. Surprisingly, Starkey is on hand, in the middle of teaching a First Aid class. The two, astonished to see one another, confess that neither will actually see any action: both have separately been told that since they are over 40 the War Office has little use for them. The tone of the story's ending is ambiguous, neither melancholy nor jubilant. The relationship between Starkey and Miss Delacheroy is unresolved; the war has faded into the background. We are left simply with the stark and unglamorous fact of age and the recalcitrance of death. It is as hard for Sinclair to experience and re-create disappointment as it is for the patriotic mother in *The Tree of Heaven* (1917) to 'realize' the Boer War: 'the forms were grey and insubstantial; it was all flat and grey like the pictures in the illustrated papers; the very blood of it ran grey'.[15] But the blood in her family does run grey: her youngest son is at first refused because of his heart condition, and her husband, over 35, is refused because of his age: 'he said bitter things about "red tape", and declared that if that was the way things were going to be managed it was a bad look-out for the country'.[16] The family are humiliated not just by these events but also by their son Michael's initial unwillingness to enlist: the war brings shame as well as, eventually, pride.

Miss Delacheroy is humiliated by her inability to pass her nursing exams, and Starkey only makes it worse by continually pretending that he is about to leave for Belgium. Her shame is

a sexual shame: about being a woman, about not being as good as a man, and, implicitly, about her sexual rejection by Starkey and his cruel teasing of her. May Sinclair's own experience of the war was somewhat different. She managed to bypass the red tape that would have kept her away from the front because she had money. There had been no money in her family: her father was a shipowner who went bankrupt when she was about 8 years old, and for much of her adult life Sinclair lived with her mother in some poverty, undertaking dreary translations from German to support them both. But by the beginning of the war she was a bestseller: *The Divine Fire* (1904) was the first of many of her books to sell thousands, particularly in the United States. In 1914 she was an independently wealthy woman whose money gave her a sense of power and who was determined not to be sidelined. Yet her own accounts of her three weeks in Belgium show her undergoing both sexual and social humiliation, exactly because of her anxiety, like Miss Delacheroy's, to be in the thick of things. The accounts she wrote of her time with the Munro Corps are, as Rebecca West pointed out, records of 'humiliations',[17] and through Sinclair's arch and often awkward prose we can read a sensitive and poignant account of the embarrassment of middle age for women, of female superfluity. It is not enough to dismiss her journals, as Claire Tylee does, as 'narcissistic and myopic'.[18] Through the pictures of wounded and dying young men trails the spectre of a small and opinionated woman whose difficulty is that she is not yet dead. In the end she would be tricked into going back to Britain, and then prevented from ever returning to the front. Her disappointment manifests itself as a kind of obstinate bafflement: 'all that I know is that I love it and that I have left it. And that I want to go back.'[19] As we shall see, it was this stubborn refusal to recognize humiliation that got her out there in the first place, and kept her there in the face of much irritation and disapproval. It was presumably this resistance to feelings of disappointment or shame that prevented her from bringing 'Red Tape' to a satisfactory close. Beyond the end of the story are two people surplus to requirements left to live out their lives away from the place where they are certain life is really happening.

The Munro Corps was remarkable for many things, apart from numbering among its members an argumentative and apparently useless middle-aged woman. Its Commandant, Dr Hector

Munro, like many others who wished to put together ambulance and other units, had had to jump through many hoops to get the Corps out to Belgium in the first place. Women in particular were viewed with suspicion: Mrs St Clair Stobart, who had founded the Women's Convoy Corps in 1907, was not sent out to the Balkan war in 1912 because the British Red Cross refused to accept any women, even those who were already trained, as Mrs St Clair Stobart's were, along Royal Army Medical Corps lines.[20] At the beginning of the 1914–18 war, the British War Office was still very resistant to the idea of women. It refused to authorize the Scottish Women's Hospital Units, founded by Elsie Inglis in 1914, and Flora Murray and Louisa Garrett Anderson's Women's Hospital Corps, which went to Paris in September 1914 under the auspices of the French Red Cross.[21] Munro's Corps included an unusually large number of women. As the Baroness de T'Serclaes, one of his original recruits, commented: 'the founder and leader of the corps, Dr Hector Munro, was an eccentric Scottish specialist, one of whose primary objects seemed to be leadership of a feminist crusade, for he was far keener on women's rights than most of the women he recruited'.[22] When the war correspondent Philip Gibbs encountered the Munro Corps shortly after Sinclair's departure, he noticed with surprise the number of women in it:

> They did not seem to me at first sight the type of woman to be useful on a battlefield or in a field-hospital. I should have expected them to faint at the sight of blood, and to swoon at the bursting of a shell. Some of them were at least too pretty, I thought, to play about in fields of war among men and horses smashed to pulp. It was only later that I saw their usefulness and marvelled at the spiritual courage of these young women, who seemed not only careless of shell-fire but almost unconscious of its menace, and who, with more nervous strength than that of many men, gave first-aid to the wounded without shuddering at sights of agony which might turn a strong man sick.[23]

It was this sort of attitude that men like Munro and women like the Baroness de T'Serclaes, who later became famous as one of the Heroines of Pervyse, had to face. She describes the attitude of the other women in the party (including May Sinclair) when she and Mairi Chisholm arrived at Victoria Station in knickerbocker khaki suits: 'the others were slightly scandalized—one could see it in their furtive glances . . . It was difficult for these gentle ladies, who wore correct costumes and picture hats, to

think there could really be any need for stepping right outside the conventional lines, at all events until they got to the war zone.'[24] Applying for permission to set up an Advanced Dressing Station just behind the front lines, the Baroness was told by the Admiral that as a woman she would not 'stand the strain'. She told him that 'because I was a woman I could stand strain and hardship (I nearly asked him if he had ever heard of child-birth)'.[25] But all the same there may have been something in Philip Gibbs's comments. Munro, mistrustful of officialdom, did not want trained nurses. He was anxious to attract young women who were adaptable and adventurous. In the end he took only four of his 200 applicants, and of those four, only one, Mrs Knocker (who would become the Baroness), was a trained nurse.[26]

Munro was a doctor, psychotherapist, and one of the directors of the newly incorporated Medico-Psychological Clinic, of which May Sinclair was a founder-member.[27] Several of the women with whom he worked commented on his comic appearance, his disorganization, and his charm. Baroness de T'Serclaes describes him as 'a likeable man and a brilliant impresario, but wonderfully vague in matters of detail, and in appearance the very essence of the absent-minded professor'.[28] However, she was unimpressed with his carelessness, and left the Munro Corps to set up her own operation in Pervyse soon after May Sinclair's departure. Sinclair seems to have been more susceptible. In an entry in the manuscript version of the journal, which was not included in the printed book, she notes that Munro is 'not only a psychologist & psychotherapist, but a "psychic", & he has the "psychic"'s uncanny power over certain people (they are generally women)'. In the published *Journal* she attributes her departure to the front to his challenging her fear during an intimate dinner at her house: 'it is as if he said, "Of course, if you're *afraid*"—(haven't I told him that I *am* afraid?). The gage is thrown down on the scullery floor. I pick it up. And that is why I am here on this singular adventure.'[29] Munro would have been aware that in January 1914 Sinclair had invested the considerable sum of £500 in the clinic. He knew that she had money; he knew also that she was keen on women's rights, and had written several articles and pamphlets in support of the suffrage movement.[30] He must have imagined that she would be keen to support a feminist venture, not to mention the added

incentives of her own excitement about the war and her prior connection with Munro through the clinic. Since the corps was unable to secure official backing until the last minute (Sinclair notes that they were rejected by the War Office, the Admiralty, and the British, American, and French Red Cross),[31] they were in desperate need of money, and all four women recruits paid their own way (Baroness de T'Serclaes records that Mairi Chisholm, a fanatical motor-cyclist, sold her motor bike to raise funds).[32] There was a further financial emergency even after the corps had finally secured the support of the Belgian legation and was reorganizing itself as a commission of inquiry into the condition of Belgian refugees.[33] In a passage omitted from the published journal, Sinclair notes that 'our Treasurer, three days before the Corps had arranged to start for Belgium, had started for America, leaving all our funds safely locked up in his private account at his bank' (fo. 3).

Given this kind of pressure, it is very unlikely that May Sinclair would *not* have made some financial contribution. Habitually self-effacing but eager to help others with loans and gifts, it is not surprising that her journals do not mention the fact or the degree of her support. But Marie Belloc Lowndes in her autobiography suggests that the ambulance corps was originally Sinclair's idea:

> There must have been an extraordinarily noble streak in this remarkable writer. . . . She went on writing books, all more or less successful, until the outbreak of war in 1914. She then, with her savings, started an ambulance, putting in charge of it a brilliant medical man who, she felt, had not had his chance in life. She must have left this man completely free to select his staff, and herself occupied, in the little party which accompanied him, a post which she called that of 'the scribe'.[34]

It is also hard to believe that Munro would have allowed Sinclair to join the party unless he was dependent on her financial support. It was unclear even to Sinclair exactly what her role in the corps would be: 'they've called me the Secretary and Reporter, which sounds very fine, and I am to keep the accounts (Heaven help them!) and write the Commandant's reports, and toss off articles for the daily papers, to make a little money for the Corps'.[35] But, as Sinclair herself notes, she knew nothing of accounting, and was not a trained journalist or reporter. In the end she sent virtually nothing back to Britain, and Munro and

the others seem to have gone out of their way to prevent her from seeing any action. The Baroness de T'Serclaes did not understand what she was doing there:

> She was a very intellectual, highly strung woman who managed to survive only for a few weeks before the horrors of war overcame her and she was sent home. Her functions were not entirely clear: I think she was to act as secretary to Dr Munro, although she could only have had the effect of making his own confusion slightly worse, and there was an idea that she might help to swell the corps' tiny finances by writing articles for the Press about its work.[36]

Sinclair was superfluous not only to the war effort itself, but to the unit to which she belonged as well. Only money could buy her the proximity to war that she so desperately craved, but money could not buy her youth or expertise.

Near the end of the *Journal* she reveals that she felt like a 'large and useless parcel which the Commandant had brought with him in sheer absence of mind, and was now anxious to lose or otherwise get rid of'.[37] This feeling has been accumulating throughout the journal as Sinclair fights to be allowed to go with the ambulances to pick up wounded. Twice she describes being physically removed from the footboards of vehicles as she clings on in her anxiety to go with them. The tone of her descriptions is at once ashamed, defiant, and accusatory:

> Mrs Torrence [Baroness de T'Serclaes] got on to the ambulance beside the driver, Janet jumped up on to one step and I on to the other, while the Commandant came up, trying to look stern, and told me to get down.
>
> I hung on all the tighter.
>
> And then—
>
> What happened then was so ignominious, so sickening, that, if I were not sworn to the utmost possible realism in this record, I should suppress it in the interests of human dignity.
>
> Mrs Torrence, having the advantage of me in weight, height, muscle and position, got up and tried to push me off the step. As she did this she said: 'You can't come. You'll take up the place of a wounded man.'
>
> And I found myself standing in the village street, while the car rushed out of it, with Janet clinging on to the hood, like a little sailor to his shrouds.[38]

Throughout the unpublished journal, and from marginal comments in G. A. MacDougall's copy of the published *Journal*,[39] we know that Sinclair regarded the Baroness and Munro as the

main obstacles to her full participation in the war. Despite her characteristic timidity, the intensity of her desire to put herself in danger pushed her to defiance and exposed her to ridicule. During the corps' retreat from Belgium after the fall of Antwerp in October 1914, Sinclair, obsessed with a wounded man who had been left behind, tried desperately to return to Ghent with Miss Ashley-Smith, a nurse who also turned back at Ecloo. The chauffeurs refused to drive them, so Miss Ashley-Smith boarded a train which arrived unexpectedly. 'I got on too, to go with her, and the Chaplain, who is abominably strong, put his arms round my waist and pulled me off. I have never ceased to wish that I had hung on to that train.'[40] The *Journal* is studded with curious little vignettes such as these, which attempt to demonstrate the injustice of Sinclair's treatment as well as her courage and her desire not to betray the wounded man whom she had nursed the night before.

But what kind of a courage is this? Did Sinclair at 51 really allow herself to be bundled around in this way? Miss Ashley-Smith denied it, writing next to this passage in the margin of her own copy of the *Journal*: 'Dear me! I never saw this happen!' and adding at the end of the sentence in which Sinclair expresses her wish that she had hung on: 'Thank the Lord she didn't She said she wd come if I waited till she got her 2 suitcases!!' Elsewhere in her copy Miss Ashley-Smith does pay tribute to Sinclair's considerateness, for example in arranging to take Miss Ashley-Smith and her wounded out of Ghent with them (262), and in spite of her evident impatience with the whole Munro Corps she does not on the whole single Sinclair out for adverse comment. It seems likely then that Sinclair's description of being hauled off the train is at least an exaggeration, as though she is trying all the time to find images for her own frustration and also to avoid responsibility for her lack of success either as war correspondent or as nurse. Miss Ashley-Smith's comment about the suitcases reveals Sinclair's basic lack of understanding of the real dangers and urgency of war. Sinclair was not used to taking communities into account, working and living alone apart from a maid. By the time she went to Belgium she had lost any sense of collectivity or public responsibility, and episodes like this read like embarrassing exposures not only of naïvety but also of arrogance. Why should she return to Ghent, a town on the verge of invasion? As an

untrained woman whose only experience of nursing had been markedly unsuccessful,[41] she would have been no earthly use. In a letter to Hugh Walpole written two years after her return from Belgium she seems to recognize the awkwardness of her position: 'I'm not at all sure that *my* duty wasn't to stop at home lest I sd. get ill & become a nuisance' (4 March 1916). Her intense desire to be at the centre of things overcame the sobriety of analyses such as these.

The *Journal* repeatedly describes Sinclair's compulsive attraction to danger. As they approach Ghent for the first time they become aware of the presence of troops.

> A curious excitement comes to you. I suppose it is excitement, though it doesn't feel like it. You have been drunk, very slightly drunk with the speed of the car. But now you are sober. Your heart beats quietly, steadily, but with a little creeping mounting thrill in the beat. The sensation is distinctly pleasurable. You say to yourself, 'It is coming. Now—or the next minute—perhaps at the end of the road.' You have one moment of regret. 'After all, it would be a pity if it came too soon, before we'd even begun our job.' But the thrill, mounting steadily, overtakes the regret. It is only a little thrill, so far (for you don't really believe that there is any danger), but you can imagine that thing growing, growing steadily, till it becomes ecstasy. Not that you imagine anything at the moment. At the moment you are no longer an observing, reflecting being; you have ceased to be aware of yourself; you exist only in that quiet, steady thrill that is so unlike any excitement that you have ever known.[42]

It is immediately obvious that for Sinclair, the war is an experience of *sensation.* The highly sexualized terms of her description, extending even to the fear of 'coming' too soon, indicate at once the extent of her sexual investment in the war, but also her inability to realize the war as an experience that might be *other than* sexual. As she gives herself up to feelings, she fails to realize the potential danger she is in, and the passage as a whole disavows the sensations it describes with its repeated use of 'you' to mean 'I'. The war seems to offer an opportunity to experience sexual excitement without the guilt of sexual responsibility. May Sinclair's fierce sense of individualism (in *The Tree of Heaven* she writes with horror about the 'collective soul' of both the suffrage movement and the war[43]) dissolves into the ecstasy of passivity. For it is her body, her own capacity to 'thrill', not her mind, which acts. Elsewhere she describes going

to the war in terms that are reminiscent of conventional descriptions of falling in love, with the conventional wisdom, too, that nobody can help it: 'it is as if something had been looking for you, waiting for you, from all eternity out here; something that you have been looking for; and, when you are getting near, it begins calling to you; it draws your heart out to it all day long'.[44] The sensations of war were an obsession, almost a monomania, for Sinclair.

Her romance with war had all the thrill, the aggression, and the humiliation of an illicit affair. She notes in the *Journal* that she cannot tell Munro what she really wants, which is to go out and search for wounded under shell-fire.[45] Such a desire, she knows, is perverse and unjustifiable; indeed her presence in the war zone is perverse and unjustifiable. This sense of transgression only adds to the thrill.

> It is with the game of war as it was with the game of football I used to play with my big brothers in the garden. The women may play it if they're fit enough, up to a certain point, very much as I played football in the garden. The big brothers let their little sister kick off; they let her run away with the ball; they stood back and let her make goal after goal; but when it came to the scrimmage they took hold of her and gently but firmly moved her to one side. If she persisted she became an infernal nuisance. And if those big brothers over there only knew what I was after they would make arrangements for my immediate removal from the seat of war.[46]

Sinclair knows that she is there under false pretences, and that her real reason for being there is illicit and impossible to own up to. She carries the secret of her desire around with her. Safety becomes 'intolerable',[47] as she describes in a poem that was written for a 1914 anthology:

> They go: and our shining, beckoning danger goes with them,
> And our joy in the harvests that we gathered
> in at nightfall in the fields;
> And like an unloved hand laid on a beating heart
> Our safety weighs us down.[48]

To be in danger is to be in love, to respond. Safety merely slows the sluggish body.

Sinclair's 'joy' in the wounded men she did manage on occasion to save is expressed as a form of love. In Lokeren she is dispatched with a stretcher to pick up a man with a wound

in his back. 'I loved him. I do not think it is possible to love, to adore any creature more than I loved and adored that clumsy, ugly Flamand. He was my first wounded man.'[49] This is a kind of displaced defloration, and the description of the man's wound only intensifies the sexual tone: 'a wound like a red pit below his shoulder-blades'.[50] It is passages such as these, including the lines from the poem I quoted earlier, which make Sinclair's work so hard to read and even harder to interpret. For although there is love of a kind in descriptions like these (and Sinclair at one point attempts to carry the Flamand's stretcher herself, impatient with the stretcher-bearers' speed),[51] there is very little pity or compassion. Sinclair is moved much more evidently to pity the unwounded refugees who huddle together in their thousands in the Palais des fêtes.[52] Wounds and blood, and even the thought of a battlefield, move her rather to a sado-masochistic exaltation which is profoundly alienating and disturbing. She alternates between an image of herself as all-powerful (saving lives, arguing with Munro, and forcing him to apologize; journal MS, fo. 92*a*), and an image of herself as a useless and humiliated child. Both images are aggressive, distorted by Sinclair's rage at being rejected by a world, a war, and a man. Both moods betray too the narcissism and the exaggerated self-deprecation of someone who is unrequitedly in love. Certainly from the excised passages of the journal we can see that she was sexually attracted to Hector Munro. Her anger with Munro for going under shellfire with Lady Dorothie Fielding ('Ursula Dearmer' in the *Journal*) seems to derive as much from sexual jealousy as from concern for Lady Dorothie's safety, and the unpublished manuscript reveals a more stormy and more intimate relationship between Sinclair and Munro than is described in the *Journal*. In the published *Journal*, 'the sight of the Commandant [Munro]' reminds Sinclair that she has all the funds of the ambulance corps in her belt upstairs, and that if it retreats and leaves her behind, as Munro has threatened, it will not get very far. In the unpublished version, it is 'the sight of Lady Ursula and the C.' (fo. 88) which distresses her, and when Munro reiterates that she may be left behind, the following response is described in the unpublished but not in the published version: 'I am absurd enough to feel the tight, agonising grip of pain, such as a creature might feel if it found itself betrayed' (fo. 89). As far as Sinclair was concerned, Munro persuaded her to come, and in

the manuscript she blames him for her bad treatment and for her inadequacy: 'it has turned out exactly as I thought it would when I told the Commandant that I sd. be no earthly use to him or his ambulance' (fo. 77*a*). She came at his invitation and now he has spurned her, preferring to work with the younger women in the unit (Lady Dorothie, like Sinclair, was untrained). As Marie Belloc Lowndes writes of Munro's refusal to allow Sinclair to return to Belgium: 'though I do not think [Sinclair] was in love with [Munro], this treacherous conduct on his part in a sense broke her heart'.[53] Both Sinclair's companion in later years, Florence Bartrop, and Sinclair's niece, Wilda McNeile, wrote that she was 'not fond' of Munro, and she had few dealings with him socially after the war was over.[54]

Perhaps then it was love that made her bold. She evidently agreed to follow Munro to the war against her own instincts, and was paralysed by fear for weeks before their departure.

> And for five weeks, ever since I knew that I must certainly go out with this expedition, I had been living in black funk; in shameful and appalling terror. Every night before I went to sleep I saw an interminable spectacle of horrors: trunks without heads, heads without trunks, limbs tangled in intestines, corpses by every roadside, murders, mutilations, my friends shot dead before my eyes.[55]

As we have seen (and as she herself points out), the proximity of danger and the actual sight of wounded men provoke very different feelings in her from those she had expected: 'others may have known the agony and the fear and sordid filth and horror and the waste, but [those who have been converted to the war] know nothing but the clean and fiery passion and the contagious ecstasy of war'.[56] It is as though having passed through the 'dark night' (one of Sinclair's subsequent titles) of fear the convert is released into a brave new world of pleasure and faith.[57]

As we have seen, May Sinclair made her own war experiences the basis of a number of subsequent novels. The novel that was closest to Sinclair's own experience, *The Romantic* (1920), reproduces many of the events described in the journal, even down to the names of the villages. It tells the story of John Conway and his lover Charlotte Redhead, who have an intense but platonic relationship. Conway is passionately eager to go out to the front, but when they get there, Charlotte, who is his chauffeur, gradually realizes that he is a pathological coward who more than

once leaves wounded men, and even Charlotte herself, behind because he is too afraid to stay with them. Finally John is shot in the back by the servant of someone he refused to help. McClane (obviously Munro), the psychotherapist leader of another ambulance corps stationed in the same hotel as John and Charlotte, explains to Charlotte that John was 'an out and out degenerate' whose masculinity was disturbed and incomplete:

> He jumped at everything that helped him to get compensation, to get power. He jumped at your feeling for him because it gave him power. He jumped at the war because the thrill he got out of it gave him the sense of power. He sucked manhood out of you. He sucked it out of everything—out of blood and wounds. . . . He'd have been faithful to you for ever, Charlotte, if you hadn't found him out.[58]

John has previously told Charlotte that the reason he has turned against her is disgust at her evident desire for him: 'anybody can see. It's in your face. In your eyes and mouth. You can't hide your lust.'[59] John's cowardice is linked to his fear of women, 'like a raw open wound in his mind'.[60] His excitement at the prospect of war comes from the same source as his terror, and both are signs of a gender that is unachieved. As McClane explains it, John's life is driven by the desire for and fear of masculinity. His humiliation brings out his sadism and is somehow linked to the masochism of his desire to go to the front in the first place.

How does this presentation of cowardice link with Sinclair's own experience and with her sense of the war's significance? Although she repeatedly states in the *Journal* that her fear disappeared as soon as she reached the front, G. A. MacDougall believed otherwise. She wrote on page 307 of her copy of the *Journal*: 'they panicked the whole lot of them—there was no danger for a few days' and 'they had no orders to leave Ghent when they did it was sheer funk (*sic*)'. In a heated correspondence after the first publication of extracts from the journal, of which MacDougall's side is lost, Sinclair implies that MacDougall has suggested she was a coward: 'as for the vile motive you have seen fit to credit me with—how could I put "the cowardice and panic or whatever it was" on to you?' (n.d. [1915]). Accusations of cowardice fly back and forth, and in other of her novels Sinclair demonstrates a preoccupation with the question of what cowardice actually is (Colin, in *Anne Severn and the Fieldings*

(1922), develops shell-shock exactly because he is determined not to be a coward, and enlists despite his doctor's warning that his nervous system isn't up to it). Sinclair's representation of John Conway is an attempt to define cowardice, to explore the psychology of fear and its relation with ecstasy. Men who are frightened are not really men, and Anne Severn's nursing of Colin is a reconstruction of his masculinity. 'You've made a man of him again,' says Colin's brother.[61]

For Sinclair, as for Elaine Showalter in her book *The Female Malady*, men's fear in the Great War is both cause and symptom of a crisis of masculinity.[62] But, and this is a question neither Showalter nor Gilbert and Gubar ever ask, what is the geography of women's fear? How does it relate to their desire, to sexual and aggressive arousal? How does it relate to women's sense of their own lack of agency in both military and civil society? Sinclair has no answers. But she has at least asked the questions, questions which, in an era that assumed women would only go to the front because they wished to help their men or their country, were rarely asked and even more rarely listened to. Sinclair was angry and ashamed but determined to brave it out. It might be stretching a point to suggest that such awkwardness is a basic condition of many women's lives, but it certainly is one answer to Freud's famous question 'What do women want?' Perhaps like Sinclair they want a femininity that is neither sidelined nor ridiculed; they want a sexuality that is neither embarrassing nor frustrated; and they want a public persona that is built on more than money. The question that is at the centre of Sinclair's war journals is how to develop an authentically feminine agency at an age when you are no longer perceived as sexually pliant and fully a woman. The awkward pride of Sinclair's attempt to develop such an agency should not be undervalued, for it throws light on one of the most occluded and repressed experiences of our own society: women's shame at their own superfluity.

NOTES

1. Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (Garden City, NY, 1929), 263.
2. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'Soldier's Heart: Literary Men, Literary Women, and the Great War', in *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, ii: *Sexchanges* (New Haven, 1989), 264.

3. See e.g. the 'Little Mother's' letter, 'A Mother's Answer to a "Common Soldier"', which was widely circulated for propaganda purposes, and reproduced in Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1929; Harmondsworth, 1960), 188–91, and A. E. Foringer's poster *The Greatest Mother in the World* (1918), repr. in Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writings, 1914–64* (London, 1990), pl. 6.
4. The extracts appeared in *English Review*, 20 (1915), 168–83, 313–14, 468–76. The full version was *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (London, 1915). The original Day Book, and the full-length MS version of the published journal, which contains many passages that were cut before publication, are both in the Department of Special Collections, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania. Most of May Sinclair's unpublished papers are in this archive. References in the text which do not give publication details are to papers held here.
5. Laura Stempel Mumford, 'May Sinclair's *The Tree of Heaven*: The Vortex of Feminism, the Community of War', in Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier (eds.), *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1989), 175; Rebecca West, 'Miss Sinclair's Genius', in Jane Marcus (ed.), *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911–1917* (London, 1982), 304–7, 305–6.
6. Rose Macaulay, *Non-combatants and Others* (London, 1916), 222.
7. Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London, 1990), 95.
8. Ibid. 27.
9. Gosse's comment is quoted ibid. 13.
10. 'Influence of the War on "Life and Literature"', 1–2.
11. May Sinclair, 'Women's Sacrifices for the War', *Woman at Home*, 67 (Feb. 1915), 11.
12. May Sinclair, 'Red Tape', *Queen: The Lady's Newspaper* (14 Nov. 1914), 802–3, 802; repr. in Trudi Tate (ed.), *Women, Men, and the Great War* (Manchester, 1995).
13. Ibid. 802.
14. May Sinclair, 'Khaki', repr. in *Tales Told by Simpson* (London, 1930), 21.
15. May Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven* (London, 1917), 67.
16. Ibid. 258.
17. West, 'Miss Sinclair's Genius', 305.
18. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*, 30.
19. Sinclair, *Journal*, 332.
20. David Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath: The Story of the Women of the First World War* (London, 1966), 152–3.
21. Ibid. 178–88.
22. Baroness de T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields: Memoirs of the Baroness de T'Serclaes* (London, 1964), 37.
23. Philip Gibbs, *The Soul of the War* (London, 1915), 173.
24. *The Cellar-House of Pervyse: A Tale of Uncommon Things from the Journals and Letters of the Baroness de T'Serclaes and Mairi Chisholm*, ed. G. E. Mitton (London, 1916), 1–2.
25. Baroness de T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*, 63.
26. Mitchell, *Women on the Warpath*, 126.
27. For further information about the Medico-Psychological Clinic, see Theophilus E. M. Boll, 'May Sinclair and the Medico-Psychological Clinic

of London', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 106 (1962), 310–26.
28. Baroness de T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*, 37.
29. Sinclair, *Journal*, 17.
30. See e.g. May Sinclair, 'Message', *Votes for Women*, 1 (1908), 79; 'How it Strikes a Mere Novelist', *Votes for Women*, 2 (1908), 211; *Feminism* (London, 1912); and 'Women's Sacrifices for the War'.
31. Sinclair, *Journal*, 1–2.
32. Baroness de T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*, 37.
33. Sinclair, *Journal*, 3.
34. Marie Belloc Lowndes, *A Passing World* (London, 1948), 196.
35. Sinclair, *Journal*, 4.
36. Baroness de T'Serclaes, *Flanders and Other Fields*, 37–8.
37. Sinclair, *Journal*, 324.
38. Ibid. 247–8.
39. The copy of *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* at the Imperial War Museum contains the marginal annotations of G. A. McDougall (née Ashley-Smith), a British nurse who was working with war-wounded at St Peter's convent in Ghent. Sinclair made arrangements for her to join the Munro party when it became necessary to leave Ghent.
40. Sinclair, *Journal*, 300.
41. See ibid. 250–9.
42. Ibid. 13–14.
43. See references to the 'collective soul' of the feminist movement, and the 'collective war-spirit', in Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*, 110, 330.
44. Sinclair, *Journal*, 79–80.
45. Ibid. 104.
46. Ibid. 122.
47. Ibid. 288.
48. May Sinclair, 'Field Ambulance in Retreat: Via Dolorosa, Via Sacra', first pub. in Hall Caine (ed.), *King Albert's Book* (London, 1914); repr. in Catherine Reilly (ed.), *Scars upon my Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London, 1981), 98.
49. Sinclair, *Journal*, 196.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid. 197.
52. Ibid. 61–9.
53. Belloc Lowndes, *A Passing World*, 197.
54. See Wilda McNeile to T. E. M. Boll, 24 June 1959, and Florence Bartrop to T. E. M. Boll, 3 Mar. 1960, both in the University of Pennsylvania archive.
55. Sinclair, *Journal*, 8.
56. Ibid. 182.
57. May Sinclair, *The Dark Night* (London, 1924).
58. May Sinclair, *The Romantic* (London, 1920), 245.
59. Ibid. 214.
60. Ibid. 162.
61. May Sinclair, *Anne Severn and the Fieldings* (London, 1922), 139.
62. For an analysis of this issue, see Elaine Showalter, 'Male Hysteria: W. H. R. Rivers and the Lessons of Shell Shock', in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (London, 1985), 167–94.